



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Classical Studies Faculty Publications

Classical Studies

2000

James I. Porter. *Constructions of the Classical Body* (Book Review)

Walter Stevenson

University of Richmond, wstevens@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/classicalstudies-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Classics Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stevenson, Walter. Review of *Constructions of the Classical Body*, by James Porter. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2000): 524-27.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Classical Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Constructions of the Classical Body. Edited by JAMES I. PORTER. The Body in Theory series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. Pp. 448. \$52.00 (cloth).

This book brings together in a convenient package a variety of stimulating work by an impressive array of scholars interested in ancient sexuality and gender. Topics covered in the book vary in time and place from Archaic Greece to Medieval Europe, in field from Art History and Anthropology

to Literature and Philosophy, and in form from prose poetry to painstaking scholarly exposition. Some critics may say that this volume represents just another ill-defined collection of warmed-over talks and essays; that it tries to plug one more new life-support line into the tired body of 1970s French theory; and that it is written only for like-minded professional scholars and will seem impenetrable and dull to the average person interested in Classical Antiquity. But these critics will not score on this new volume. Though the overall conception of the collection presents some problems of clarity, and some contributions seem to me stronger than others, the book will nonetheless provide engaging reading for scholars interested in the intellectual and social history of antiquity. Though it is unlikely that this volume will reach the hands of the general public, individual essays will be useful for undergraduate courses in a variety of fields.

The scholarly reader may be somewhat surprised that the Foucauldian sounding title fronts several attacks on Foucault's legacy. Giulia Sissa, in particular, takes on Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in her essay about the negative view of homosexuality found in Greek oratory. She begins her provocative and convincing argument with a well-informed introduction to Foucault's view of psychoanalysis as a modern eruption of Christian confession. She proceeds to provide evidence that the "hermeneutics of self" did not originate with Christianity, nor did identifying a person on the basis of his or her sexual acts. Using a speech of Aeschines, Sissa demonstrates how Athenians could and did see homosexual acts as marking both the body of a citizen and his character. There is certainly much room for discussion as to whether the Attic aspersions of character are directed more at male prostitution than at homosexual acts; but she carefully approaches this thorny problem, concluding that the jurors who voted against Aeschines' gay opponent found signs of physical and moral defilement resulting from his gay lifestyle. How much weight to give this one speech within the context of Foucault's theory is debatable, but the very possibility that Athenians could identify a man as homosexual diminishes the force of Foucault's teachings.

Amy Richlin, who implicitly took on Foucault's followers in a thoughtful article published in this journal ("Not Before Homosexuality," *JHS* 3 [April 1993]), continues to argue cogently and moderately against the radically postmodern stance presupposed by this volume's title. She justifies her discussion of Cicero's decapitation with a moving statement of purpose, calling her remembrance of Cicero *Kaddish*, and likening this remembrance to that of Holocaust survivors. Though she agrees with many tenets of postmodern methodology, she will not abandon the concept of real experience: "Cicero *was* decapitated, an experience without quotation marks." She argues that the schoolmen who dwelt on many possible angles for treating Cicero's decapitation were creating their own art of

remembrance in the age of the Roman proscription. She outlines the profound value Romans placed on the head (*caput*), the variety of ways that Romans defined privileges and outrages centering on the head, how the head logically became the locus of proscription, and how various authors focused their remembrance of Cicero's martyrdom on his head. The effect is a humane and generous look at both the remarkable cruelty of the Romans and the literary resistance it inspired.

But the majority of the authors follow Foucault's lead in boldly historicizing ancient society and its dealings with the human body. Many readers will find that these efforts raise profound questions concerning ancient life, though not all of this historicizing is effective. For instance, Maud Gleason contributes a brilliant piece on truth contests in later antiquity. She first draws attention to the striking parallels between Christian and "pagan" popular literature in the second century—specifically, how the truth was represented as being convincingly transmitted through dead bodies in Apuleius's *Golden Ass* and the anonymous *Acts of Peter*. Corpses of various sorts that tell the truth go back to the *Odyssey*, though my favorite is Periander's use of his wife's corpse to find something he lost, in Herodotus 5.92 (maybe Lucan's witch in *Pharsalia* VI is the most memorable). Nevertheless, one has to concede that cheap sophistic battles are often settled by corpses in second-century literature. But Gleason's attempt to make broad generalizations about Roman society and Christianity left me both fascinated and dubious. She asserts that "perhaps we should see in Christianity's valorization of the intact body a polemical alternative to an existentially unsettling worldview in which abrupt flip-flops of fate are precipitated by random events, rogue supernatural forces, and arbitrary intrusions of political authority." It seems to me that most stories, whether Christian, "pagan," or whatever—stories that are written by and for the less than privileged classes—will present an unruly world. Doesn't Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, to choose perhaps the most popular reading of the fourth century, have as many random events, rogue demons, and dangerous Roman soldiers as any second-century novel? (Not to mention the fact that Anthony's body takes on quite a few unwelcome changes.) Likewise the subsequent piece, Robert Lamberton's study of Porphyry's and Plotinus' connecting of body with soul, reveals the "unitarian" thought of very influential pagans in the third century (the emperor Julian and Iamblichus would be highly visible examples in the fourth century). Gleason's appealing contrast of Christian unified truth with pagan multiple truths doesn't seem to explain all the evidence satisfactorily. We are left hoping that she will expand on these original and tantalizing ideas.

Special mention should be made of Froma Zeitlin's contribution. She begins with an elegant and pithy review of the study of sex and gender in antiquity, writing from an elevated perspective that perhaps no other

Classicist can match. Who else not only wrote on gender in Greek tragedy over thirty years ago, but actually wrote essays that are still very valuable today? Here, she provides a nuanced and humane reading of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* in which she continues to set a high standard for future Classicists to follow. It seems to me that this essay would be both accessible to the average educated reader and stimulating, perhaps even inspiring, to the professional scholar.

Finally, in his introduction, James Porter has made a heroic effort to organize these very diverse essays. Several authors made little effort to fit their paper to the theme, and the theme itself struck me as somewhat elusive. At times Porter's historicizing seems strained, for example when he states that "the body in its canonical form was, so to speak, 'invented' for the first time in classical antiquity." In other places he ascends to the level of abstraction the topic demands, with questions like this: "What, for example, is to be made of the status of bodies that appear in poetry or rhetoric, or the materiality of the language and even of the forms and structures that convey them, not to mention their performative dimensions?" This broadening, of course, allows the (very interesting) discussions of Pindar and Ovid to have a place in this volume, though they do not directly approach the history of constructions of the body. But it also leads to a slightly less than satisfying vagueness in the definition of the topic. Nevertheless, as editor, Porter has gathered together a remarkable group of talented authors, and the end product is a testimony to the vibrancy, imagination, and breadth of modern Classical scholarship.

WALTER STEVENSON
Department of Classical Studies
University of Richmond